



Is that on the SCQF...? Winter Mountain Leader Award By Mountain Training Scotland

Scotland is home to the highest mountains in the UK and many people enjoy exploring them all year round. In the winter months, when they're covered in snow and ice and blasted by cold winds, looking after yourself, let alone anyone else, can be a challenge. Winter Mountain Leaders are trained and assessed to do just that.

Individuals must have already gained the Mountain Leader qualification which involves six days of training and a five day assessment in 'summer' conditions before entering into the winter equivalent; a further six day training course and five day assessment. Between training and assessment for both qualifications is a consolidation period where individuals develop their personal and leadership skills, using a syllabus to focus on any weaker areas.

Winter Mountain Leader is a qualification awarded by Mountain Training Scotland and is at SCQF Level 9, the same level as a bachelor's degree. The credit rating of 31 points is great evidence of the status of the qualification and allows employers to benchmark its level of difficulty against other qualifications, in this case a university degree or graduate diploma. In many cases, it can also be used to transfer credit points between different learning programmes.

Outdoor instructor and Winter Mountain Leader Crystal Patton describes her motivation for pursuing the qualification: *"You can climb a mountain numerous times in summer conditions but in winter it can be a completely different place and is a really unique experience. Being able to facilitate others' enjoyment of this was a huge factor in wanting to lead groups in winter. Also from a professional development point of view I think it is really good to keep learning and Winter Mountain Leader was always a qualification that I had held in high regard. After hearing tales of friends' and*

colleagues' experiences whilst going through the qualification, I knew the preparation and assessment would put me through my paces but equally would reward me with that feeling of achievement and satisfaction that you only seem to get after working hard!"

Winter Mountain Leader assessment involves spending two nights in the mountains, at least one of which will be in a snow hole; a shelter dug into a snow bank which provides protection from the elements. The winter mountain environment has many hazards including avalanches and cold injuries such as frostbite. To operate effectively requires a great deal of experience, gathered over several seasons, which involves a massive investment of time and money.

Crystal's best advice to anyone else considering the scheme: *"Don't let the fear of the unknown or your perception of the qualification hold you back. The fact that the qualification is well respected is a double-edged sword - it is this that makes you aspire to it but it is easy to listen to people's tales of suffering and believe it is virtually unobtainable! I very nearly backed out because I felt there was some magic formula that people who were Winter Mountain Leaders had that I didn't have access to!! It is hard work but it is not so hard that you cannot achieve it by just putting in the time and effort. Invest in some good boots and try to keep your feet as happy as possible!"*

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